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Nuts and Bolts of Writing a Disaster Plan

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Katrina 2005. Vernonia 2007. Ike 2008. These events have raised our awareness of how vulnerable our communities and institutions are. The magnitudes of these disasters are, fortunately, rare, but many of us have experienced smaller emergencies. No matter the scale or cause, a comprehensive disaster plan can help libraries avoid or mitigate the effects of a disaster. A good plan should address four areas: prevention, planning, response and recovery.

Writing a plan may seem daunting at first. But even the smallest library can put together a basic plan in a day or so. Indeed, small town or rural libraries often have an advantage over larger urban or academic libraries. Connections with local law enforcement personnel, fire marshals and other first responders are more personal, and library staff often wear (or have worn) many hats, giving them a leg up in knowing who to call and what to do. Regardless of your library's size or location, there are many resources available to support you in writing your plan. All you need to do is start!

Components of a Disaster Plan

Section	Content
Prevention	Risk Assessment—Location Risk Assessment—Facilities Institutional History
Planning	Disaster Team Communication Plan Salvage Priorities Insurance Training & Practice Supplies & Resources
Response	Initial Response Detailed Response
Recovery	Collections Services

Prevention: Your Library Environment

A disaster plan should address any type of emergency or disaster your library might face. Start with an environmental scan of your local area. Identify the likely events that could occur. For the Pacific Northwest, that would include earthquakes, tsunamis, flooding, volcanic eruptions and severe weather. Review your library's history. List any emergencies that have happened, no matter how small—this will help you identify chronic problems or particularly vulnerable areas. Perhaps your library has regular leaks during the winter season, or that cranky HVAC system often misbehaves. Knowing what your potential hazards are not only gives you the opportunity of proactively responding, but can save time in identifying causes or locations during an actual event.

Planning: Disaster Team

One of the first steps in developing a plan is to create a team. A team helps ensure a swift and organized response to a disaster. Each member should have specific responsibilities that relate to their position at the library. For example, collection or acquisitions staff are naturals for identifying salvage priorities, while your IT staff should be involved in planning to get your online services back up and running. In smaller libraries, some people may have to wear more than one hat. There are many approaches to defining roles. The accompanying table is just one example.



Disaster Team

Role	Responsibilities
Library Director/Deputy Director	Leads team; establishes operations; directs all external communications; approves financial outlays.
Communications Manager	Develops and maintains phone tree; works with Director in communicating with staff; triages and monitors calls; updates library phones, e-mail and Web sites.
Systems Manager	Restores online services; assesses damage to equipment; recovers damaged equipment and software; recovers data.
Salvage Manager	Assesses damage to collections and directs triage efforts; coordinates salvage and packing out activities; purchases and maintains salvage materials; works with Director to bring in outside recovery vendors.
Recorder	Keeps track of records generated by team, including major decisions and chronology; maintains inventory of damaged or discarded materials; coordinates photographic/video records of disaster (critical for insurance purposes).
Logistics Manager	Works closely with Salvage Manager and Recorder in arranging for transportation and storage of materials; monitors workflow and schedules of recovery staff; arranges for food, drink and personal hygiene.

Planning: Communication

If you do nothing else right, you must have near-perfect communication following a disaster. Otherwise you will be managing two disasters. (Alire 2000, 174).

It is imperative that your library has a phone tree that is regularly updated. People differ in their emotional reaction to critical news, so it is vital that communication is clear and straight-forward. All library staff and volunteers should be included in the tree. Libraries governed by a board should consider adding board members' contact information. At OHSU Library, our Disaster Team developed four information points to be relayed whenever the phone tree is activated: the nature of the incident; the status of the library; directions for reporting to work; and when to expect the next contact. Both the caller and the person being called take responsibility for making sure that each communication point is covered.

If the library has to close or limit services, you will need to get the word out to your patrons. Identify all the communication channels you would use (phones, e-mails, Web site, blogs, etc.) and develop scripts that you can easily post or send out. Lastly, think about how you would contact the media. Here, care and thought is required. Some libraries are part of larger systems, so communications are handled by designated professionals. All inquiries should be referred to those staff. But if you work for a smaller library, it is important that one person is selected as the official spokesperson. This ensures that messages are clear and consistent, and helps quell rumors that could be disruptive to the recovery or reputation of your library.

Planning: Salvage Priorities

If you could only save a portion of your library's collection, what would it be?



Assessing your collection ahead of time will give you a clear idea of what sections to focus on when a disaster strikes. Some criteria to consider include: irreplaceable items, often of local and historical value; financial and human resource documentation critical to operations; items that would be expensive to replace, such as art books; your Reference collection, which often has encyclopedia sets, atlases, etc. Arrange a walkthrough with your first responders and point out the locations of your most valuable items. They will do their best to save those items first.

Planning: Insurance

Most libraries are part of larger institutional bodies that are either self-insured or purchase insurance for the entire organization. Your first step is to research which kind of policy you have, the dollar amount of your coverage, and what kind of incidents are covered. It is worth the time to find out what sort of documentation is needed to support any claims. Libraries with rare or special collections should consider arranging for a professional assessment to determine the value of those collections.

Planning: Supplies & Resources

Every plan should have a comprehensive list of local, regional and national sources of assistance. Start with your local first responders, such as Fire, Police or Sheriff, and Ambulance, as well as other local governmental agencies. List regional support groups like WESTPAS (<http://www.westpas.org>) and the OLA Preservation Roundtable (<http://www.olaweb.org/mc/page.do?sitePageId=63278>). Be sure to include state and federal agencies, such as Oregon Emergency Management and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Agency). Don't overlook national disaster-response and recovery services companies.

A large-scale disaster requires large-scale response. Proactively setting up agreements with companies that specialize in helping libraries and other cultural institutions recover collections and facilities could save your library a lot of grief and time.

Even libraries with limited budgets should find the funds to assemble a basic disaster supply kit. Many libraries buy 65-gallon, wheeled garbage bins to store their supplies in. Not only does this provide a handy container, but you can easily transport it around as well! Your library probably already has some supplies on hand, such as first aid kits, mops and buckets, paper towels, plastic garbage bags and clipboards and pencils for recording. Other supplies to have on hand include:

- Flashlights (get the shakable ones that do not need batteries)
- Head lamps (like the kind miners attach to their hats)
- Hand-cranked radio (many models will also recharge cell phones)
- Hard hats, rubber boots and gloves
- Plastic sheeting and duct tape to protect collections and equipment
- Caution tape
- Digital camera for recording purposes
- Spil-Pillows (for absorbing water coming from leaks)
- Supply of heavy-duty boxes for packing out

This list is not comprehensive, and every site will have its own specific needs. Many of the resources cited in this issue include supply recommendations, so if your budget is flush, check them for more suggestions.

Planning: Training & Practice

Do not overlook this critical aspect of disaster planning. You never know how



you or others will respond when a disaster strikes. Training and practice build confidence in your abilities to react appropriately, as well as “embodying” your learning (just as our fingers can automatically dial friends’ phone numbers, but our minds can’t pull the numbers up!). Make a commitment to sign up for training opportunities when they arise, such as the free training offered by WESTPAS. Monitor NW Central for other workshops. You will find the time is worth it—not just to learn about disaster planning, but also for networking with other libraries. Take your knowledge back to your library and train staff who were not able to attend.

But even if your budget or staffing levels preclude much training, there are still low-cost, minimal-time approaches. At the very least, you should conduct an annual phone tree drill. Embed disaster planning into regular staff meetings by allotting 5-10 minutes for discussion on a particular aspect, such as evacuation, earthquake response, or a leaking ceiling pipe. Arrange a fire drill with your facilities manager or local fire station—and then see if they will provide training on using a fire extinguisher. Send out a quick e-mail to your co-workers, asking them if they know where the nearest exit is. Once you’ve donned your “disaster glasses,” you’ll discover all sorts of way to practice disaster response.

Response: Initial Response

In any disaster, human safety comes first. No collection or facility is so valuable that lives should be endangered to save them. The Initial Response section of a disaster plan should be brief and easy-to-read. It can include important contacts and phone numbers, as well as listing immediate steps to be taken in major scenarios. Many libraries create a one page document that can be folded and kept in each staff’s wallet or purse, and posted at your public service desks.

Response: Full Response

In this section of your disaster plan, you can write out detailed responses and procedures for specific events. For example, in an earthquake, the best practice is for each person to take cover under a desk or table until the initial quake is over. But once the rattling and rolling is over, then what do you do? Have you included a section on how to respond to a fire, including where the alarms are and how to use a fire extinguisher? How do you handle a violent person who is threatening staff and patrons? Your local first responders can be a great source of advice and training, so bring them in for a tour and solicit their input.

A disaster plan should also map out evacuation routes and pre-determined meeting spots for staff to gather and report in. The Disaster Team should discuss who is responsible for evacuating patrons. Pay particular attention to patrons with disabilities. Identify a safe location and have them stay put until emergency personnel arrive. A designated Disaster Team member should take responsibility for letting first responders know that a person needs help with evacuation.

The role of the Recorder becomes essential at this stage of the response. You will want full documentation of the disaster for many reasons: insurance claims; reports to governing bodies; historical record; and staff learning. The recorder should keep track of all records generated by the team, including major decisions and a chronology of the event.

Be sure to work with your systems and IT staff to identify what needs to be done in the case of power outages or hacker attacks. Our online collections have become as essential to our users as our print collections, so developing plans to get electronic collections back online is well advised. Do you run regular backups? Can you relocate



servers elsewhere? Talk to your vendors about setting up emergency access from other sites so that your users can still use library resources, even if the building remains closed.

The 48-Hour Rule


In a disaster that involves water, you have 48 hours to stabilize the environment and pack wet books out to a freezing facility before mold spores begin to bloom. You do not want this to happen! It could take months to eradicate and could permanently affect collections, facilities and living beings.

Recovery: Collections

A basic rule of thumb for disasters is that water damage is a given. Broken pipes during severe weather, sprinklers going off to douse a fire, or flooding all result in wet books, records and other materials. Invoke the 48 Hour Rule (learn it, live it, breathe it!). Do whatever you can to reduce humidity and avoid turning up the heat, as mold thrives in both. If the disaster is small and contained, you may be able to air dry materials, but be forewarned that you will need a lot of space for this. In a larger-scale disaster, it is advisable to contact a disaster recovery company. They will immediately send out skilled professionals who can guide you through every step. Be prepared to pack out collections for vacuum freeze drying. This section of your plan should have basic instructions for stabilizing the collection; air drying print, electronic, photographic and textile materials; and packing out materials.

Recovery: Services

Even if your building and material collections are damaged, as long as you have your OPAC and electronic collections available,

you can still provide basic access. Think about how other services could be brought back. Could reference still be provided off-site through e-mail, IM, phone? What about L-Net? Could you provide ILL services? Could limited story hours or book groups still be conducted in another location? One approach is to brainstorm the various services and functions your library provides. Then rank by priority: essential, high, medium, low. Identify needed equipment, software applications, staffing requirements and work site options for each service. In the event of an actual disaster, you can pull these documents out and quickly assess where you can start getting your library up and running again. 

Back to Normal—Whatever that is!

There! You've done it—you've survived this article! Pat yourself on the back. Take some deep breaths. Eat some chocolate. Think about how you will start writing or updating your plan. Decide to check out some of the resources discussed in this issue. Talk to other library staff and share your learning. Every sentence in this last paragraph also applies to what you might want to do once your library has recovered from a disaster. Good work!

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